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'We're going to be burying miners': NIOSH cuts gutting key work in safety research

By Mike Tony mtony@hdmediallc.com

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Anita Wolfe, a retiree of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) facility in Morgantown, Monongalia County, speaks against the federal employee job cuts occurring in West Virginia during a news conference held by West Virginia labor representatives outside the House of Delegates chamber in the West Virginia State Capitol in Charleston on April 3, 2025.

SEAN McCALLISTER | Gazette-Mail

Scott Laney doesn't know what will happen to the X-rays.

Over 750,000 X-rays, he says, are in the basement of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health's facility in Morgantown, where the federal research agency studies worker health.

NIOSH occupational study topics have included respiratory disease in miners through the [Coal Workers' Health Surveillance Program](#), established through federal law in 1969 and widely credited for saving and extending miners' lives through the black lung screenings it has provided to miners at no cost to them.

"I'm certainly concerned that all of this work over the course of the last 50 years may wind up in dumpsters," Laney said.

That's because Laney, a Preston County resident who had been a research epidemiologist for over 15 years with the Coal Workers' Health Surveillance Program, is one of hundreds

of NIOSH workers whose positions recently have been cut amid the Trump administration's dramatic downsizing of the federal workforce.

Laney and others say the cuts have effectively halted the CWHSP.

"It's been communicated clearly that the program is going away," Laney said, citing the cuts.

March 31 correspondence from the Department of Health and Human Services — the NIOSH's parent agency — notified employees they were impacted by a "Reduction in Force" with a separation effective June 2, a date that Laney said would mark the end of administrative leave for most CWHSP employees.

Citing a Trump executive order from February that called for reducing the size of the federal workforce to "eliminat[e] waste, bloat, and insularity," HHS told American Federation of Government Employees union officials the Reduction in Force would have a probable effective date of June 30. Around 873 NIOSH staff, or at least two-thirds of the agency's workforce, were expected to be cut, according to national reports.

The HHS letter to union officials claims employees were being cut "whose functions are either unnecessary or virtually identical to duties being performed elsewhere in the agency" and that the cuts are part of a "broader strategy to improve [HHS] efficiency and effectiveness to make America healthier."

"That doesn't make sense," said Anita Wolfe of Preston County, who spent almost 40 years at the NIOSH and helped lead the CWHSP for 20 years before retiring in 2020.

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Wolfe, whose father's death was hastened by black lung disease he developed as a coal miner, said the Trump administration's call for more coal production coupled with its deep slashing of the federal workforce, including additional cuts in the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration which inspects mines, will lead to more dangerous mine dust and safety shortcuts.

The MSHA cited NIOSH cuts in its Tuesday announcement that it's pausing enforcement of a landmark rule finalized last year to protect mine workers from toxic silica dust exposure for four months, days before the April 14 compliance date for coal mine operators.

"I think we're going to be burying miners," Wolfe said.

NIOSH budget costs US workers \$2.11 each

The NIOSH's Fiscal Year 2023 budget was \$362.8 million, amounting to \$2.11 per U.S. worker, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

The total revenue reported for 2024 by Alliance Resource Partners LP, one of the nation's largest coal producers, was \$2.4 billion — more than six times the total FY 2023 NIOSH budget.

Alliance Coal, a company affiliate, told a federal court the MSHA silica rule would be financially onerous to implement as industry groups asked for the rule to be put on hold

before the agency announced it was pausing the rule itself.

“I think the return on investment for what NIOSH does far exceeds any budgetary gain that is made by cutting NIOSH,” Laney said.

The NIOSH cuts have been widely denounced by unions and other worker allies, including the United Mine Workers of America, the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers, and the American Industrial Hygiene Association, a group of occupational safety-focused scientists and professionals which launched a campaign Wednesday to encourage professionals to contact their elected representatives about the importance of restoring NIOSH staff and funding.



'An attack on all workers': Cuts to NIOSH in Morgantown, mining research panned

By Mike Tony mtony@hdmediallc.com  6 min to read

West Virginia’s high concentration of mine and chemical workers, which the NIOSH has produced decades of research to protect, makes the state likely to be hit especially hard by the agency’s downsizing.

“Cutting NIOSH is a lethal blow to working people and their families that rely on them,”

said Jen Sass, senior scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a global environmental advocacy group.

'Miners will needlessly die'

Laney said that just prior to his termination, he was working on an implementation rollout of a surveillance program for metal and nonmetal miners with a focus on expanding radiologist participation to accommodate new X-rays expected to be submitted.

The MSHA's rule finalized last year to reduce the limit on permissible toxic silica dust exposure included medical surveillance requirements for metal and nonmetal mines modeled on existing requirements for coal mines.

HHS correspondence to the AFGE lists NIOSH mining research divisions in Pittsburgh and Spokane, Washington, as branches to be affected.

Wolfe said the Pittsburgh and Spokane offices had been virtually eliminated.

Dr. Drew Harris, director of the Black Lung Program at Stone Mountain Health Services in southwestern Virginia, lamented hearing that cuts had affected CWHSP employees who provided medical records to miners, those who could accept chest X-rays and those involved in a program looming especially large in West Virginia.

The program allows miners to exercise their rights under a section of the Title 30 Code of Federal Regulations, known as Part 90. The program gives miners with occupational lung disease the right to be transferred to a low-dust environment without having their pay reduced and with protection against termination or other discrimination.

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Sam Petsonk, a Beckley-based lawyer who specializes in representing coal miners, co-filed a federal class-action lawsuit on behalf of miners against HHS and its Trump-appointed leader, Secretary Robert Kennedy Jr., seeking to force the HHS to continue conducting health surveillance through the CWHSP and restore the NIOSH Respiratory Health Division in Morgantown.

“Miners will needlessly die if they close this office,” Petsonk told the Gazette-Mail.

Harris was the lead author of a study published last year that identified progressive massive fibrosis, the most severe form of black lung, in 1,177 coal miners, 86% of whom lived in West Virginia, Virginia or Kentucky. The [study identified](#) a high prevalence of certain lung opacities as implicating silica dust exposure as a key risk factor for progressive massive fibrosis in coal miners.



MSHA pauses rule to protect miners from toxic silica dust days before compliance date
By Mike Tony mtony@hdmediallc.com 3 min to read

“Urgent action is needed to protect them from this preventable and debilitating disease,” the study concluded.

“Now, amidst this ongoing crisis of black lung in Appalachia, is not the time to fire staff or close offices meant to screen, prevent and detect a chronic lung disease in coal miners,” Harris said.

‘Maybe now’s the time to go directly to the president’

In a statement, HHS Deputy Press Secretary Emily Hilliard declined to address the NIOSH cuts or the future of NIOSH’s Morgantown facility. Hilliard said NIOSH, along with unspecified “critical programs,” would join the Administration for a Healthy America, alongside other agencies “to improve coordination of health resources for low-income Americans.”

HHS said in a March 27 statement the NIOSH would be combined with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, Health Resources and Services Administration, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

West Virginia’s congressional delegation has been mostly quiet in response to the NIOSH downsizing, not criticizing Trump for his administration’s extensive cuts.

Spokespeople for Reps. Riley Moore and Carol Miller, both R-W.Va., have not responded to requests for comment.

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“I am in favor of cuts to waste across the federal government, and I’m sure Secretary Kennedy understands how important coal miner health programs run by the department are to West Virginia,” Sen. Jim Justice, R-W.Va., a coal magnate whose companies have been chronic violators of federal mine safety regulations, said in a statement last week.

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., chairwoman of the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, told reporters via teleconference Thursday her office was following up to check on the status of NIOSH cuts.

“I think you make a good suggestion,” Capito said when asked by the Gazette-Mail if now was the time to increase public pressure on Trump.

Capito said Trump “needs to make sure he’s doing everything he can,” adding that she thinks Trump wants to make sure miners are in a safe work environment.

“[M]aybe now’s the time to go directly to the president and ask him to take a look at that himself,” Capito said.

Laney observed that no West Virginia members of Congress signed a letter addressed Tuesday to Kennedy expressing “alarming concern about reports that nearly the entire workforce that works to improve the health of miners was laid off,” including those indicating over 185 NIOSH employees were being laid off from the agency’s Morgantown office alone.

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Signed by Sens. Mark Warner, D-Va., Tim Kaine, D-Va., John Fetterman, D-Pa., and Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., the letter asked Kennedy to report how many HHS employees remain who work on mining health and safety, how many have been fired and how many additional employees he intends to fire.



'Recipe for disaster': MSHA cuts fueling safety fears 15 years after Upper Big Branch

By Mike Tony mtony@hdmediallc.com 12 min to read

Wolfe would like to see a stronger response from West Virginia's congressional delegation.

"They're from a coal mining state," Wolfe said.





The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Mobile Occupational Safety and Health Unit, where workers conduct black lung screenings on coal miners, is parked at Pipestem Resort State Park, which spans Mercer and Summers counties, in June 2018.

Gazette-Mail file photo

NIOSH work key in assessing Kanawha Valley cancer risk

It was NIOSH research that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency used as the basis for a 2016 risk assessment that found ethylene oxide, a chemical prominently polluted in the Kanawha Valley for generations, is much more dangerous than the agency had previously held.

The EPA said it used NIOSH research focused on lymphoid cancer and, in females, breast cancer mortality because it was of high quality and included the largest of available studies.

“EPA used the NIOSH study because it was the best at the time, and still is,” Sass said.

The Union Carbide plants along W.Va. 25 in Institute and at 437 MacCorkle Ave. SW in South Charleston have emitted over 868,000 pounds of ethylene oxide since 1987.

Production and use of ethylene oxide in chemical manufacturing at Union Carbide plants in the Kanawha Valley predated World War II.

Ethylene oxide is a colorless gas usually odorless at community air levels emitted by chemical manufacturers and medical device-sterilizing facilities throughout the Kanawha

Valley.

Long-term exposure has been associated with increases in female breast and white blood cell cancers, including leukemia, Hodgkin and non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Short-term exposure to high concentrations of ethylene oxide can cause nausea, fatigue, respiratory irritation and vomiting.



Work to protect public health in WV disrupted amid federal staff limbo under Trump

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A 2018 EPA air toxics assessment found that six of the 90 census tracts with the highest cancer risk from ethylene oxide were in Kanawha County. The total cancer risk in Kanawha was 366 in 1 million, 10th-highest in the country.

‘Why we were important’

NIOSH work has extended well beyond the coal and chemical industries.

The NIOSH supports the [National Firefighter Registry for Cancer](#), an effort to understand and lower risk of cancer among U.S. firefighters.

Micah Neimeier-Walsh, vice president of AFGE Local 3840 representing NIOSH employees

in Cincinnati, told the Gazette-Mail last week the union had learned an online site for the registry would be shut down because there were no information technology staff members left to manage the system. A [webpage](#) through which firefighters have provided their information to sign up for the registry was unavailable Thursday.

NIOSH staff responded to the Ebola epidemic in 2014 and the H1N1 influenza pandemic from 2009. The NIOSH provided technical assistance for responder health in the World Trade Center rescue and recovery after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

In 1991, a NIOSH-issued bulletin found environmental tobacco smoke to be a potential occupational carcinogen and recommended that exposures be reduced to the lowest feasible concentration.

“I think the public is becoming more educated as to what we did and why we were important,” Wolfe said. “And I had a lot of people tell me, ‘I had no idea that NIOSH was involved in all occupations.’”



'Clear evidence': New data show severe lung disease hitting regional, younger miners hard
By Mike Tony mtony@hdmediallc.com 7 min to read

Laney fears the peril in Wolfe's past tense.

“It's certainly upsetting to lose your job, but I'm much more concerned about the health and safety of miners in West Virginia as a result of this,” Laney said. “There are people who are going to potentially die because of the work that we don't do.”

Mike Tony covers energy and the environment. He can be reached at mtony@hdmediallc.com or 304-348-1236. Follow @Mike__Tony on X.

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